

# Exploring Theme

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

A short story's **theme** can be defined as what the story is about—the problems or issues that it explores.

## WHAT IS A THEME?

When trying to discover the theme(s) of a story, remember that a theme is not a summary of the plot. A theme is a universal idea suggested by the specifics of the story. It is stated in general terms.

The true themes of a story hold true for the whole story—not just a part of it. They are the central ideas that state the essential meaning of the story.

**Explicit vs. "hidden" themes** It's easy to state the theme of stories that have been written deliberately to communicate a specific lesson or moral (for example, Aesop's fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, which ends with the explicit moral: "Slow and steady wins the race").

Most stories, however, are not as easily reduced to a single simple lesson. They are likely to have more than one important theme imbedded in the story itself.

**Some traditional short story themes** Although a story's themes are specifically linked to the story that explores them, authors draw on common theme patterns that have appeared in stories throughout the history of literature. Have you encountered any of these traditional themes in your reading?

The struggle between good and evil

The differences between nature and civilized society

The conflict between the individual and the community

The differences between country and city life

The conflict between human free will and fate

## RECOGNIZING THEMES IN A SHORT STORY

A story communicates its central theme or themes in a variety of ways. In looking for themes, consider some of these possible clues:

The title of the story

Important images or symbols in the story

General observations made by the author, narrator, or characters in the story

Any "moral" suggested by the outcome of the conflict

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A SHORT STORY:

1. Can you state the major themes of the story? Do they relate to any traditional themes that you have encountered in other reading?
2. What clues has the author used to communicate these themes?